

# What Rev. Father Dakras



"The godless invaders gathered around units of panic-stricken Christians, who were unarmed and helpless, men, women and children, and drove them into wells. These wells, filled with humanity, were guarded while other Kurds dashed to the already deserted houses, produced kerosene oil, and poured it into the wells.

"On the 4th day of January no less than fifteen such wells had been filled at Jandarii, near Urmia, and simultaneously they were set on fire. Merciful Father! I can still hear the shrieks of the victims. But their tormentors watched the work of their demon acts with serene satisfaction."

By Rev. Father Dakras

Pastor of the Roman Catholic Church at Urumiah

Athens, Greece, November 7

**A**LTHOUGH far away, here in Athens, I still have an innate fear of the Turkish hordes who are still ravaging my beloved pastorate beyond the snow-clad Caucasus Mountains.

I still hear the shrieking voices of innocent children and the horror-stricken cries of men and women, old and young. It is like hell let loose without a minute's warning! I still see them, hear them. It was an orgy. It was like a nightmare in which poor, weak and infirm human beings grappled with the demons of other regions. I sometimes doubt it; doubt that I was a mute and helpless witness to all the horrors of the past few months, and had it not been for my many bodily wounds I would have persuaded myself to believe that it was all a dream, a terrible nightmare.

They inflicted many wounds on me, but above all, I lament, over my left eye; a gash across my left cheek cut my left eye-ball in two. How happy were the men and women who died of cold and hunger; they did not live long enough to feel the cruel blade or the blow of the fiendish Moslems. If the Christians of the western world would only realize how many thousand times unholy is this Moslem "Holy War!"

Upon the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish war the population of the Urmia (spelled also Urumiah) district, especially the Christian Persians and Armenians, felt uneasy, as they knew well that their country would be a sure battleground for the Russo-Turkish armies.

Early in the war two Russian armies crossed the Turk-Persian frontier, through the mountain passes, and drove the Turkish troops out of the Persian lands. Later the Turks returned, reinforced, when suddenly the Russian troops withdrew even beyond Tabriz. This was early in last January, and from that hour dates the extermination of the Christian races everywhere in Turkey.

The Moslem hordes poured into the regions evacuated by the Russian troops.

No sooner had the ill-fated Christians observed the vanguard of the retreating Russians than they became horror-stricken. Rich and poor, young and old, strong and infirm, every Christian hastily snatched whatever he could possibly carry, and started on the tracks of the retreating Muscovites, all bound toward the North. Later the sad emigration was augmented, until the ill-fated Christians covered every inch of the district to the North.

Along the snow-clad Caucasus Mountains the surging, moving humanity looked like a great expanse of black water splashing against the crests of the frozen hill-tops.

Shoeless and sockless children, lashed to the backs of their mothers, whose bare feet danced over the snow-covered fields; their scanty household utensils dangling from the backs of the grownups; babies crying with cold; children hungry, frightened and shivering; old men and women leaning against their sticks and carrying burdens that would ordinarily have crushed the strong youths; young women who had purposely disfigured themselves with the fear of falling into the hands of savage Kurds; these and many other terrible scenes rendered the plight of the Eastern Christians the most pitiful of all its long history of agony for their faith.

I cried loud and long, and prayed to the Saviour to have pity for the poor suffering humanity. Many were my own little flock in my parish. But (forgive me, O Lord!) even He appeared to have abandoned His flock!

By this time, the savage Moslem Kurds and Bedouins on horseback had already entered the city. Like wolves charging into a sheep herd, they dashed into the frantic, terror-stricken, helpless multitudes. Like the harvester with his keen-edged scythe, so the Moslem hordes on horseback waved their crescent-shaped swords and mowed down innocent men, women and even infants, many of whom were only a few months old.

## Christians Driven Into Burning Wells

The godless invaders gathered around units of panic-stricken Christians, who were unarmed and helpless, men, women and children, and drove them into wells. These wells, filled with humanity, were guarded while other Kurds dashed to the already deserted houses, produced kerosene oil, and poured it into the wells.

On the fourth day of January no less than fifteen such wells had been filled at Jandarii, near Urmia, and simultaneously they were set on fire. Merciful Father! I can still hear the shrieks of the victims. But their tormentors watched the work of their demon acts with serene satisfaction.

This is "Holy War!" It still haunts me. I still hear them. My one eye still sees the flames thundering from the wells. I still smell the burning flesh of my flock. Even in my sleep I cannot escape the agony of Urmia.

At Diza, about twenty miles south of Urmia, the Kurds buried more than 3,000 Christians to their chins. The following day many of these had already died, but still quite a

number of them were half alive. On the sixth day of January, when the main Bedouin troops arrived from the north, they rode over the skulls of the thus buried Christians.

The Persian Christians, who are better known as Nestorians, fell victims to the Moslem sword through the entire northwestern section of Persia, while the Christian population of the whole of Turkey, the southwestern part of the Trans-Caucasus, and the Mesopotamia district today, the living witnesses to the fiendish workings of "Holy War."

The Roman Catholic Church, the school, the Missionary and the Little House of Mercy in Urmia are heaps of black mud and brick, here and there a black, body protruding from among the burnt wood and stone.

Instead of following the Russian armies who had Urmia district about the first day of January, the Russian armies were busy engaged robbing and pillaging the surrounding country and murdering its inhabitants. The entire month of January the Moslems pillaged, plundered and murdered until the return of the Russian detachments. Most of the Christians of the Russian Caucasus who recaptured Tabriz on the 20th day of the same month were half alive.

## Poor Mothers Carrying Dead Children

From Urmia to Tiflis, the capital of the Trans-Caucasus, easily 200 miles and the roads mostly run through mountain crests covered with many feet of snow. Roads even today will bear witness to the most ghastly tragedies perpetrated by the Moslem hordes in the "Holy War."

When at last we had reached Jaffa, in Russia, northern banks of the River Arax, which is the southern terminus of the southern branch of the Trans-Caucasus road, the Russian commandant received us with great consideration and humanity. Out of about 30,000 souls had started from Urmia the greater number perished on the journey. Those who were fortunate enough to reach the Russian frontier after the eighty miles journey through the snow-clad mountain passes, received for other kindness from the Moscovite authorities.

Many mothers who had their children tied to their backs were ignorant of the death of their beloved ones—husbands, fathers; the poor babes were frozen stiff. Dreads of these mothers had to be taken to the military camps and have their dead children separate their bodies by the surgeons. This is "Holy War!"

And still, many isolated groups of Christian refugees were bound for the Russian frontier and who were accompanied by military escorts, fell into the hands of the defeated Turkish detachments, who, during their wreaked vengeance on the unarmed Christians. Men, women and children were killed, while the young were carried away by the Moslems.

The military searching parties reported that they found many persons among the heaps of the dead of the roadside, whose eyes were torn out of their sockets, who were struggling among the dead like so many. These persons were covered with blood that was frozen against their entire body.

I have so far related perhaps only one-hundredth of what actually transpired during these terrible months in the district alone.

My brother priests in the Billa section and in the District, sent their sad greeting to Tiflis, to the capital Caucasus. In these words they addressed us:

"The whole of Armenia, from the shores of the Black Sea to the shores of the Mediterranean, is a vast graveyard and desolate."

I remained in Tiflis until the middle of February. I felt it my sacred duty to travel to Teheran, the capital Persia, there to appeal to the Mohammedan Theologians, several of whom I personally knew to be against the "Holy War"—to use their influence and raise a condemning voice against this butchery that was going on in Turkey and Persia in the name of their Faith.

I travelled through Russian territory, finally reaching Teheran, but my mission proved futile. So I decided to Persia and reach the banks of the River Tigris, which I knew was being controlled by the Indo-British army, the Persian Gulf northward. My journey across Persia was full of difficulties, and it would have been full of perils not been for the fact that I spoke the Persian language as a native.

Arrived at Korna I met a Greek Orthodox priest of the race, who spoke Arabic, Persian, some English and some Greek. I revealed myself to him and told him that I was a Roman Catholic priest, a Syrian Maronite, and was in Urmia. He said he was on his way to El Hafut at Baghdad with a message to the Mohammedan Sheikh of Ghadr.